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Vegetal Horrors: Blair Witch, Darkwood and Non-human Turn Game Studies

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This abstract explores the Vegetal Turn's implications for videogames as a representational medium, using *Blair Witch* (Bloofer Team, 2019) and *Darkwood* (Acid Wizard Studio, 2017) as case-studies concerned with the horrifying potentials of plants. Extending the Non-Human Turn as developed in Animal Studies, the Vegetal Turn asks that we consider both the implications of plant life as a mode of being which poses a radical alterity to humanity, and the meanings and effects of the intersections of plant and human life in culture (Irigaray & Marder, 2016). In these case studies, trees subvert traditional hierarchies of being and play on what philosopher Michael Marder identifies as Western society's fear of plants (2014), suggesting the importance of analyzing nominally background/non-interactive environmental assets. This abstract outlines planned work arguing, following Ian Bogost's 'Alien Phenomenology' (2012) and the work of Michelle Westerlaken (2016) and Jański Krzysztof (2016) on the place of the 'animal' in Games Studies, that our discipline should consider the vegetal implications of the non-human turn in the Humanities.

We all live in a 'plantscape,' a plant-dominated biosphere (Hall, 2011:3), and we will all, eventually, become plant food (Keetley 2016:1). Nevertheless, Game Studies discourse is largely reflective of Western society's "plant blindness" (Wandersee & Schlusser, 1999, 2001), reading plants as background assets or aesthetic components of the landscape (See Hayot, E. & Wesp, E. 2009). More experimentally, TAG Research Lab has engaged real plants as agents within playful experiences designed to foster and question affective relationships to the plant world (Marcotte, 2018). There remains, however, significant room for scholarship concerning the functions and significance of plants within games. Building on Keetley and Tenga's volume on film, literature and comics (2016), this project highlights the implications of the Vegetal Turn for games in terms of existential horror. As philosopher Matthew Hall argues (2011:6), plants culturally present a radical alterity to humans and their anthro/zoocentric world-view.

Peter Wohlleben (2015) demonstrates, reinforcing what Hall outlines as decades of accumulated evidence on the agency of plants (2011:12-13), that trees communicate and possess volition ordinarily invisible to us. In both *Darkwood* and *Blair Witch*, the prominent visibility of wood – trunk, twig and branch – opposes the plant-blindness of

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the audience with the claustrophobic pressure of plant bodies, and makes these hidden lives visible and affective. In contrast to the normative cultural denigration of plants, these horrors articulate strong, agentic flora by both the atmospheric density of assets, and by taking on properties of animality such as animacy (Marvin & Mchugh, 2014). Plant bodies combine with anthropomorphic forms in *Blair Witch*, through the guise of barely-glimpsed enemies hiding between the trees and beyond the human eye, giving animate agency to the alien life of forests. Our character is unsettled by the sequential discovery of logs sculpted into nearly-human figures, each an iteration: something formless taking shape like a slowly sprouting plant. This tension, between wood as both a seemingly inert material and a material which shapes itself, highlights the horrifying otherness of flora in the way its movements and growths are inherently surprising – visible to us only after the fact.

The Autumnal flora of First-Person Survival Horror *Blair Witch* at first presents a metaphor for the emotional withdrawal of the post-traumatic protagonist, in line with guilt-trauma horror (Hawkins, 2010), but avoiding dryad monsters and ominously mobile mounds of leaves, the player must navigate a forest which is both reflective of their character's mental state and also radically alien to the human player. This is a disorienting landscape, both 'vacant' in animal terms and grossly populated by vegetal overgrowth – twisted roots and branches which obstruct the player and visibly reclaim abandoned architecture and traces of human activity. As Lisa Kroger argues, nature eventually reclaims its spaces (2013:26).

Darkwood presents the player with an even more direct arboreal nightmare, in which they must unpick a surreal mystery revolving around a sentient forest which ensnares humans through their dreams, luring them deep into its root systems to be decomposed and digested. Unusually for horror games, which utilise human/animal or monstrous antagonists seen from the third or first-person vantage of the player (Perron, 2018), *Darkwood* takes the perspective of the threatening vegetal – a top-down view in which the forest frequently blocks and obscures player sight, embodying what Carroll calls monstrous multiplicity, 'massification' (Carroll, 1990). As in *Blair Witch*, roots contest human agency by penetrating human interiors, but *Darkwood* even more radically merges the human and the plant with hybrid forms which challenge and violate the corporeal subject: traces of skulls and arms expressed in bark and branches. While most of the world in *Darkwood* is rendered in two dimensions, trees project themselves into the third dimension, reaching up to the player beyond the screen, dominating the player character and both foregrounding and frustrating the phenomenology of the player's sight.¹ In so doing vegetal horror disrupts the legibility of the game, building on the conventional frustration of player interactions in the survival horror genre (Perron, 2018). From this plant's-eye view, the human is rendered a footnote in a forest of giants, challenging the hierarchy of being which humans have inherited from Aristotle, as charted by Marder (2014:30-43) – uprooting the human, and affirming the plant.

Collectively, vegetal horror in these case studies is the contestation of human supremacy through the temporal, spatial and perspectival subversions. More consequentially for the discipline of Game Studies, this contestation of conventional hierarchies and this emphasis on the normally invisible prompt methodological questions for the wider medium. I argue that the leafless trees massed in *Blair Witch* and *Darkwood* ask us to reconsider the agency and importance of non-interactive props and assets in conventional 'plant blind' games. Plants which resist fading into the background challenge the privileging of players, characters, mechanics and narratives with their horrifying, obdurate inanimateness. As I begin this programme of research, I hope to explore the ways in which games can articulate modes of vegetal being as well as the perspectives plant-thinking might bring to the analysis of games.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 For discussion of player perception, and the complex modalities of the moment-to-moment phenomenological ties of player to avatar, see Keogh, 2018.